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ABSTRACT

As "Saving the African American Child" (the report of the Task Force on Black Academic and Cultural Excellence) emphasizes, African American educators must be aggressive in carrying out their inherent obligation to eliminate the impediments to growth and development which restrict the life chances of African Americans. Black America needs Black educators who have a solid foundation of Black consciousness and who have high professional competence. While the circumstances of Black Americans are not as desperate as they once were, race and socioeconomic status remain the chief determinants of the scope of educational opportunity and the quality of education received. Furthermore, the White monopoly of public education has resulted in Black Americans being the most deliberately misinterpreted, the most poorly educated, and the most severely impaired of all the major ethnic groups served by the public schools. The public schools in inner city areas, in particular, have come to be synonymous with the education of Blacks and other disenfranchised minorities and carry with them the stigma of failure. Community involvement in education is an essential condition for quality education. African Americans cannot succeed in improving the educational lot of the mass of African American students without the collective and collaborative participation of African American educators. (RDN)

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A CALL FOR GREATER BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND PROFESSIONALSIM IN THE PURSUIT OF CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

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A CALL FOR GREATER BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE PURSUIT OF CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

The use of race theory to give legitimacy to the establishment of a socioeconomic pattern of segregation of and discrimination against black Americans was a fundamental part of the institution of slavery. Judge A. Leon Higginbotham in his historically important book, In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, noted that the Constitution's references to justice were mocked by the treatment meted out daily to black Americans by all three branches of government.[1] Of the pioneer immigrants to this nation, the treatment accorded to black Americans has been shamefully unique. For most of the period from 1619 to the present, the courts joined the executive and legislative branches of the government at local, state, and national levels in the denial of basic rights to black Americans. No other group of comparable population and longevity in America, has been received so poorly by the dominant groups of this democracy as have black Americans.

Much of that which ails our democracy has its roots grounded in the nation's failure to extend to all Americans the basic rights and benefits set forth in the Constitution. Some blacks believe this failure to apply constitutional guarantees equally to black Americans does not result from white Americans being caught in a dilemma--a dilemma comprised of a conflict between what whites say and what whites do. Andrew Billingsley declares:[2]

> ...The fact is that Americans do not have a dilemma; they do not truly believe in equality or democracy or any of the other widely accepted views about basic American values...For it must be clear to the careful observer of our society and particularly our nation that whatever common good has emerged is a by-product of something else which Americans consider much more important,and that something else is much more clearly related to self-centerdness, ethnocentrism, greed, power, death, and destruction than it is to any commitment to cooperation, to life, and the common welfare.

Black Americans are engaged in a seemingly never ending struggle to avert their total subjugation as a race. The pace of social reform in general, and of significant improvements in the condition and treatment of black Americans, in particular, is excruciatingly slow at best. At worst, it is retrogressive. Few, if any, of the benefits of our democracy accrue to black Americans without the imposition of a fierce campaign over a protracted period to secure those rights which most other Americans receive as almost automatic dispensations of citizenship in the world's most affluent democracy. Race remains a determining factor in shaping the life chances of black Americans. Regretfully, Gregory S. Kearse is correct: "Race if anything, becomes an increasing factor in light of this nation's sleepy-eyed awakening to affirmative action and other measures designed to correct past acts of racial discrimination."[3] Black Americans made their greatest advancements toward securing some of the fundamental rights of citizenship at a time in the nation's history when the quality of life for white Americans was significantly advanced. But even in the best of times, white Americans were never enthusiastic about equal access and affirmative action for black Americans. In his insightful commentary on the "highs and lows" of progress of blacks in America, Alan Pifer declared: "Progress for blacks yes, but also extensive failure measured against the nation's highest ideals and against the national self-interest."[4]

I acknowledge the reality that the circumstances for black Americans are not as desperate today as they once were. But there is little cause to celebrate the cessation of many of the more blatant and demeaning discriminatory practices against blacks when the facts reveal "that blacks are still materially much worse off than whites, that racial prejudice and discrimination are still pervasive, and that new, more subtle barriers to further progress are being erected."[5] Resurfacing to prominence in a sluggish economy is a conservative mood among many white Americans that communicates a "short-sighted and uncharitable spirit" toward blacks and other disadvantaged minorities. Far too many whites believe that black advancement needs no further compensatory assistance from the courts or governments. Apprehension among black Americans is widespread that their hard earned gains in equal access and affirmative action will be lost or reduced by an uncaring society caught in the discomfort of an economic recession.

The debilitating effects of the sanctioned and unsanctioned application of racism on the factors which are essential to a quality education have continuously denied to the mass of black Americans any reasonable opportunity to secure such. This nation has misused public education by using the public schools as the chief instrument for the perpetuation and acceptance of the concepts of white supremacy and black inferiority. This perversion of the educational process and the miseducation of black and white students have been so thorough and so entrenched in the attitudes and behaviors of most white Americans that few are able to understand their specific and collective contributions to this demeaning and delimiting process.

During the initial period of public education in America, the states had no mandate from the U.S. Supreme Court to provide public education for blacks even if they provided such for white Americans. In fact, in those states in which blacks were legally considered as property of white Americans, public education was but one of the many essential societal supports which were denied to black Americans. Later when the U.S. Supreme Court did declare that black Americans were entitled to public education, the Court gave its sanction to "separate but equal" public schools for blacks.[6] For the most part, those states which adhered to the doctrine of "separate but equal" provided a public education for black students which was assuredly separate but distinctly unequal.

Primarily as the result of the protestations of black Americans, and the decision rendered by the U.S. Supreme Court since the Brown decision in 1954, improvements in educational opportunities for black students were achieved. The Constitution can no longer be used by racists as their principal reference for the justification of racially segregated public education. The U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown which proclaimed that black Americans were entitled to an equal educational opportunity to receive a public education came 335 years after blacks arrived in America in 1619.[7] Yet, the improvements have not culminated in equal educational opportunity being a reality for the majority of black Americans. Race and socioeconomic status continue as the chief determinants of the scope of educational opportunity and the quality of education received.

Almost two decades ago, Joseph Alsop wrote that if the worst racist in America set out to design a structure to keep the black man enchained, he could do no better than use the present system of public education.[8] The scope and intent of public education for black Americans have been shaped by decisions made, for the most part, by white Americans. This white monopoly has resulted in black Americans being the most deliberately misinterpreted, the most poorly educated, and the most severely impaired of all the major ethnic groups served by the public schools. In terms of service to black students in particular, the public schools have not moved from good to bad or even from average to poor; they have never been adequate. The notion that this nation once had good schools for its most disadvantaged citizens but has since let them deteriorate is false.

For many Americans, public education has fulfilled its responsibilities well. However, for the mass of black Americans, the public schools have not provided educational experiences that are purged of racism and that are capable of overcoming the cumulative effects of deprivation and discrimination. Public education, by its very nature in a democracy, is illegitimate if it functions as a negative or defeating process. For only to the extent the public schools do indeed educate all students do they satisfy the legitimate expectations of the citizenry and justify their existence as one of our most indispensable and cherished social institutions. If black Americans are ever to bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement, they must succeed in restructuring their role in the management of those institutions which control their social, political, and economic condition and status. The barriers which prevent the masses of black Americans from ever achieving a significant state of fulfillment and success are not insurmountable. However, the historic efforts of black Americans to secure all of their inherent and earned rights will represent only a tragic exercise in futility, unless they can make public education a productive institutional support for their children.

Saving the African American Child, the report of the Task Force on Black Academic and Cultural Excellence, a Task Force commissioned by the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Inc., provides a provocative and concise description of the major problems and needs confronting African Americans in their historic quest for equality of educational opportunity and quality education. But most importantly, Saving the African American Child, provides African Americans, in particular, and non-African Americans,

in general with a profound declaration of the essential philosophical concepts and premises which ought to undergird the provision of public education in America for African American students in the nation's vast array of public institutions of higher, secondary, and elementary education. The report of the Task Force is not a guide for the incorporation of improved pedagogical practices in the education of African American students. The report is a document of monumental importance in its assertion that black consciousness ought to permeate all aspects of the education of the African American child and that the education of African Americans must play a more vital role in our struggle for survival and self-determination as African Americans. The integrity and viability of this democratic, pluralistic society as well as the life chances of African Americans depend, in large measure, on the effectiveness of public education as an instrument of social consciousness and reform.

I am honored to have been a member of the Task Force, and I consider the report of the Task Force to constitute a statement of historical importance in the education of African American students. The African American educator has both a professional and cultural obligation to use his or her expertise and position for the eradication and rectification of racism and socio-economic inequities. This gathering of the New York Alliance and the New Jersey Alliance of Black School Educators is an appropriate forum for developing ways and means by which African American educators can become more effective advocates and can provide improved educational programs and services for "the unfortunate victims of an uncaring society."[9] In the report of the Task Force, Carter G. Woodson is quoted. Woodson asserts: "It may be of no importance to the race to boast of many times as many educated members as it had in 1865. If they are of the wrong kind, the increase in numbers will be a disadvantage rather than an advantage."[10]

The African American educator must be aggressive in carrying out his or her inherent obligation to eliminate the various impediments to growth and development which restrict the life chances of African Americans. The African American educator truly has no logical choice but to seek to make public education an instrument capable of altering elements of the social structure in order to provide equal opportunity for all. The struggle for black survival and self-determination in America demands that African American educators demonstrate a high level of both professionalism and black consciousness. The African American educator should be a first-rate professional, but equally as important, the African American educator needs to be a professional who is capable of advancing the premise that "Blackness is not a regretable human condition but

the proud physical and psychological heritage of one-eleventh of this nation's citizenry."

Most black children now live in the urban centers of the nation and attend schools which are predominantly black. In 1950, all but one of the nation's 25 largest school systems had white majorities; by 1984, only two enrolled more whites than minorities.[11] "By the year 2,000, the shift will be even more apparent in K-12 schools and will have a profound influence on postsecondary education, the work force and the nation as a whole, statisticians and demographers say."[12] The challenges confronted by public education in our democracy are enormous, and they are the most complex and the most demanding in the schools of the urban centers of the nation. The public schools in America's urban centers serve large concentrations of students who are the most severe victims of racial and socioeconomic discrimination and deprivation. Urban school systems are heavily populated with students who are the most damaged victims of the ravages of environmental supports which fall far short of meeting the minimal standards of decency, humaneness, and justice. The public schools in the depressed areas of urban America reflect the most pronounced inadequacies of public education and the teaching profession.

The inner-city areas, in particular, of the urban centers provide the most dramatic documentation of the negative consequences of the more advanced stages of societal deterioration. The public schools in such areas have come to be synonymous with the education of blacks and other disenfranchised minorities and carry with them the stigma of failure. Finding a representative number of black parents who are willing to come forward in defense of urban education is as about as difficult an assignment as getting passengers in retrospect to sign-up for the maiden voyage of the Titanic. Whatever the explanations, it cannot be refuted that most black students in urban schools are not achieving at a level that is needed to function adequately in this society.

There is no school district serving a large black student enrollment that is not confronted with the constraints imposed by inadequate funds. The financial prospects for urban school districts are not bery bright, and the bankruptcy or near bankruptcy of big city school districts is becoming common.[13] Inflation and a declining tax base impact most negatively on urban school systems where black students are found in the greatest numbers.[14] Most mainly black school systems have had no choice but to reconcile the imbalance between available funds and existing expenditures by reducing programs and services. The struggle for a better share of existing revenues

is not being won by school districts which need to provide improved programs and services for those Americans caught in "The Other America."

The retrenchments imposed on mainly or heavily black school systems over the past three years have changed the status of their level of funding support from inadequate to disastrous. Retrenchments heaped upon already hard times produce even larger class sizes in schools that deserve a more equitable and compensatory approach to the allocation of resources for instruction. Curricular offerings which should be enriched and more diverse are being diluted to the detriment of innovative and individualized instruction. Without sufficient funds, a school system is unable to take full advantage of the creativity, determination, and dedication of its personnel. There comes a point when the cumulative effects of reductions over a period of time create a very serious dislocation of basic priorities and impose serious limitations on the ability of a school system to function. The end result, tragically, is that children suffer. Schools are being closed and instruction interrupted for long periods of time due to insufficient funds or walkouts by teachers in support of their demands for higher salaries.

If black America were to present an indictment of white America for the woeful state of public education for black Americans, the particulars of the indictment should include such complaints as the following:

1. Historically and currently, race and socioeconomic status have been and are the chief determinants of success or failure in the public schools.
2. The public schools are characterized by oppressive and crippling patterns of both racial and social segregation which operate to reduce significantly the access of black students to equal educational opportunity and a quality education.
3. The public schools participate directly in the various social processes that establish and perpetuate those beliefs and conditions which prevent or sharply reduce the opportunities of black Americans to compete effectively for an equitable share of the socioeconomic rewards of our society.
4. The study of black history and culture has been ignored or distorted to the point of implying that black Americans are less worthy than white Americans.
5. Large numbers of black students are routinely defined as lacking in competence and assigned to low-status groups or tracks.

6. Effective schools for black students are in short supply and effective school systems for large numbers of black students are nonexistent.
7. The gap between the achievement of white and black students is present in 1985 just as it was in 1954; the majority of black students in the public schools perform below national norms on standardized achievement tests.
8. While many white teachers have responded to the demands of school desegregation with commendable professionalism, some white teachers cannot or will not change their ways and do not respond to black students and their parents as human beings deserving of respect, goodwill, and equality.
9. Teachers tend to direct their teaching to higher status children, and tend to spend their time ignoring or criticizing students perceived as lower status children.
10. Achievement tests and their results have been used in violation of some of the basic principles of learning and instruction.
11. Racism was a major factor in segregation and is a major factor in school desegregation.
12. More often than not, school desegregation represents a process that adds token bits of color to institutions controlled entirely by whites.
13. Three decades of school desegregation have produced neither genuine racial desegregation of public education nor the extension of equal educational opportunity to the majority of black students in America.
14. When black students have attained equal access in public education, equity in participation and outcome do not often flow from the attainment of equal access.
15. The public schools are not administered in a manner that assures black parents that educators and school officials are accountable to blacks for the relevance and effectiveness of program priorities and instructional practices and materials.
16. The distribution of black Americans in the management of public education is completely unrepresentative of either the high percentage of black students in many of the large urban school systems or the significant number of blacks residing in the communities such school systems serve.

17. The facilities and academic programs for black students do not compare favorably with those established for white students.
18. Schools with mainly black enrollments tend to be disproportionately staffed with the uncertified and sub-standard teachers in the school system.
19. Black school administrators and black teachers are underrepresented in their employment in the public schools.
20. Far too many white Americans remain reluctant to support the provision of essential instructional services to black students in mainly minority schools and school systems.
21. The emerging commitment among white Americans to increase public funding for non-public schools is directly related to the significant increase in the percentage of black students in many urban school districts.
22. Collective bargaining for teachers in mainly black schools has produced more perts and privileges than improved pedagogy and professionalism.

There is an intimate relationship between the degree and quality of community involvement in the educational process and the degree of quality education and community support for and understanding of our schools. Public education was never meant to be a professional monopoly. A school system's responsiveness to the needs of the community and the community's effective and democratic participation in the educational process are absolutely essential to the achievement of the highest possible level of educational growth and development. A viable representative structure for community participation in the process of policy and program planning and implementation should provide community representatives with clear and direct access to the decision-making process. Public education has been the most successful in those communities where the politics of education produced an effective partnership between school and community.

Politics is the activity pursued by groups to resolve their demands and needs. People act in their own interests and in the interests of the groups to which they feel loyal.[15] Arthur F. Corey notes: "politics is the process through which organized power is, in the final analysis, applied in a free society."[16] Martin Luther King Jr. noted that power "is the social force that any group can utilize by accumulating its elements in a planned,

deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control."[17]

Power is a much sought after but often elusive commodity. The distribution of black Americans in the management of public education is completely unrepresentative of either the high percentage of black students in many of the large urban school systems or the significant number of blacks residing in communities such school systems serve.[18] The equitable resolution of this predicament is complicated by the fact that while blacks may frequently constitute the majority figure in the school population, they generally do not constitute the majority in the community encompasses by the school district's boundaries. Also, the ability to support public education from tax revenues is as much a matter of the will of the community as its resources. Reluctance has been demonstrated by communities whose majority population is white to provide adequate financial support for school systems whose student populations are predominantly black. As blacks continue to secure increased representation on boards of education and other representative structures which formulate educational policies and programs, there will still remain the need for blacks to affect not only the direction of existing resources but to expand significantly the revenues which are available to public education in mainly black school systems.

If educational decisions affecting black students are to be viewed as just and legitimate by black communities, they must reflect a clear understanding of and a direct relationship to the numerous social, political and economic barriers experienced by black Americans in attempting to reach an equitable distribution of the goods and services produced by the society. Blacks are demanding and seeking more than just a re-examination of the educational process and a reorientation of the social values that undergird the process: they are seeking to restructure the racial compositon of the base of power that dictates and regulates those educational policies and programs that affect them. Because they are keenly aware of the population trends in the major cities of this nation, many who oppose the efforts of blacks to gain democratic representation do so recognizing that such a representation might result in many instances in a black majority.

As the population of major cities in America becomes increasingly black, it not only seems inevitable but also in keeping with the best democratic principles that their representation in the management of public education be a major force. The restructuring of power is an irksome business, but the historic justification and the urgent need for black communities to be equitably involved in the management of public education cannot be ignored.

They are demanding and deserve legitimate channels through which they can express their concern and assume a share of the responsibility for the quality of public education. Black America is saying loudly and clearly that it will not stand passively by and watch the public schools show a different face to white students from the one it shows to the majority of black students.

The push by black Americans for control over schools that serve large numbers of black students is a criticism of public education for blacks and a recognition of the need to restructure the role that public schools perform in the lives of black Americans. Preston Wilcox notes that white America is learning that it can no longer deceive blacks into believing that white-controlled education means quality education.[19] In the 1960s a group of black educators and parents meeting at Harvard University posed the question: "How do we gain control of our schools; thus the destiny of our children?"[20] Blacks who may be moderates, militants, or extremists in their civil rights activities all hold in common the belief that blacks must take steps to assure that those who created and supported segregated public schools are prohibited from allowing the same educational neglect to occur in desegregated schools. A paramount commitment in black communities is to free black children from the restrictive experiences and massive failures of public education. For an ever increasing number of black parents, this requires white control over the schools that their children attend be ended.

Neither I nor any other individual has the genius to provide you with a surefire blueprint for making the promises of public education a reality for the mass of African American students. But it does not take a genius to know that African Americans cannot succeed in improving the educational lot of the mass of African American students without the collective and collaborative participation of African American educators. If African American educators are to be of greater assistance to other African Americans, we must strengthen our black consciousness and elevate our professionalism. Black consciousness and professionalism are not incompatible manifestations of behavior for the African American educator. Black consciousness, as it is projected in concert with the basic tenets of our democracy, is a logical and legitimate form of social behavior.

W. E. B. DuBois is cited in Saving the African American Child. He warns about the destructive consequences of white Americans forcing black Americans

to see themselves only through the eyes of those who have deliberately curtailed our freedom.[21] In its report, the Task Force advocated a black consciousness that would motivate African Americans to be active in the struggle for survival and self-determination. The black consciousness that rings through almost every page of Saving the African American Child is identified with "the preservation of one's people and one's self, the reproduction of one's people and one's self, and the care of the progeny which result."

I believe that black educators must be militant in the pursuit of social justice; a militant is one who challenges those institutions and individuals which oppress and otherwise unduly restrict the lives of African Americans. Militancy is a refusal to accept racial injustice and inequality. Professionalism enjoins a commitment to the inauguration of systems of education in which all students are accorded equitable opportunities to attain a quality education. Professionalism is the revelation of a defensible philosophical foundation for undergirding programmatic thrusts and administrative actions. Professionalism is the indication of a level of social awareness sufficient to cope satisfactorily with the sociological and psychological manifestations of cause-effect relationships in the crises, confrontations, and conflicts inherent in the pursuit of quality living and quality education in America. Professionalism means measuring your success as an educator by the progress of your students toward the realization of their potential as worthy and effective citizens.

Professionalism means not being an apologist for the indefensible acts of colleagues be they black or white. The African American educator who truly blend black consciousness with professionalism with professionalism assumes clear, articulate, and forceful leadership in the rectification and prevention of the impediments to growth and development which delimit the life chances of African Americans. Black consciousness should represent full acceptance of the fact that the black educator is uniquely obligated by the factors of race and the disadvantaged status of African Americans to dedicate his or her efforts to the fullest extension of the principle of equal educational opportunity and the benefits of a quality education to all African Americans. black consciousness and professionalism should both reveal to the African American educator that he or she has no mandate to preserve the "status quo."

The "status quo" operates not for, but against the needs of African Americans.

In Saving the African American Child, the Task Force declared: "No child can be ignorant or lack respect for his or her own unique cultural group and meet the others in the world on an equal footing."[22] Just as the African American educator must continuously upgrade his or her professionalism as an educator, there must be equal concern for upgrading and preserving his or her black consciousness. Way back when I was a young school superintendent in Washington D. C., there were occasions when I had to remind certain members of the Congress of the United States that I was not prepared to accept the congressional paternalism imposed on the District of Columbia. Now, at that time, I thought that my black consciousness might even be a step ahead of my professionalism. But Preston Wilcox, in his review of my article which was focused on the inequities associated with public funding support for mainly black school systems, taught me a lasting lesson. Wilcox, after a series of very favorable comments on my efforts as school superintendent, presented his punch line. He declared: "As have all black men who have succeeded in white America on the term/credentials/criteria of the oppressor, Scott appeared to vacilate between the recognition of the fact of white institutional racism and a deeply held need to have the American Dream realized."[23]

The black experience should pre-condition black Americans to approach with considerable caution and apprehension proposals championed by white Americans which purport to bear benefits for black Americans. What black Americans are prepared to accept and reject in terms of the permissible policies and practices in the education of black Americans will provide key indicators of just how deeply rooted in black America are the roots of black pride and consciousness. In the struggle to become a more viable, functioning group in a society in which power and influence are the guardians of life, liberty, and happiness, black Americans must be keenly aware of their common history and their common predicament as black people. "Being a good American does not require that black Americans forfeit their cultural heritage or become facsimiles of white Americans."[24]

The African American educator must be relevant philosophically and professionally to the needs of American Americans in a racist society. The pursuit of cultural and academic excellence is an endeavor that must be perceived as indispensable and inseparable. In the year of my birth, Carter G. Woodson in his commentary on the Miseducation of the Negro, declared that unless educated black persons are actually prepared by their education to face the ordeal before them, they unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor. Black America needs black educators who have a solid foundation of black consciousness and who have high professional competence. Under the auspices of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Inc., the Task Force on Cultural and Academic Excellence has produced a report that should revitalize black consciousness among American American educators and that should inspire a hostility toward mediocrity in the delivery of professional services to American American students. My friends, the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Inc. has placed in your hands a document that gives purpose and direction to our efforts as African American Educators.

It is time to put an end to the notion that racism cannot be defeated in our lifetime. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy if each generation of blacks says it and believes it. We must not retreat on the issue of cultural and academic excellence for African Americans. As you revitalize your black consciousness and expand your professionalism, be guided by the words of the late Lorraine Hansberry: "The only extremism that disgraces us before our children is to do nothing to alter our present condition." I believe it also was Lorraine Hansberry who declared:

Fleecy locks and black complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim.
That skin may differ, but affection
Dwells in black and white the same.
Were I so tall as to reach the poles
Or to grasp the oceans at a span.
I must be measured by my soul.
The mind is the standard of the man.

HJS:gl
May 1985

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